



CUTHBERT GRANT

MANITBA
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL
AFFAIRS AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Historic Resources Branch

**Honourable Eugene Kostyra
Minister**

1983

CUTHBERT GRANT

Like many other Métis born in the North-West in the eighteenth century, Cuthbert Grant was a child of the fur trade. His father, Cuthbert Grant, Sr., was a prominent trader and partner of the North West Company (NWCo), and his mother was the daughter of an Indian woman from the Qu'Appelle region and a white trader. Although he was educated in Scotland, Grant returned to the North-West and eventually emerged as a leader of the "New Nation," the Métis. Both the North West and Hudson's Bay companies in turn benefited from his influence over his followers. As a Métis leader at the Battle of Seven Oaks, and later as Warden of the Plains and founder of Grantown, Cuthbert Grant was a prominent figure in the history of Manitoba.

The Early Years

Cuthbert Grant was born in 1793 at Rivière Tremblante, a fur trade post on the upper Assiniboine River. When his father died in 1799, Cuthbert, Jr., was placed under the guardianship of William McGillivray, the prestigious and powerful leader of the NWCo. Like his older brother James, Cuthbert was taken to Montreal, baptized and then sent to Scotland to be educated. Although there is no record of his return to Canada, he was sent to Red River in 1812 as a clerk with the NWCo.

Cuthbert Grant was only nineteen years old when he returned to the North-West and found himself in the middle of a fur trade war between the NWCo and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). His arrival also coincided with the beginning of a colony at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers on a huge tract of land granted to Lord Selkirk by the HBC. The establishment of the colony only served to intensify the already hostile relations between the two fur trade companies. It was located in the midst of a major supply route and pemmican producing area, and the NWCo believed that the colony had been established to block their provisioning route. The traders and partners of the NWCo were also concerned that the influx of settlers would place an additional strain on the limited food resources of the area.

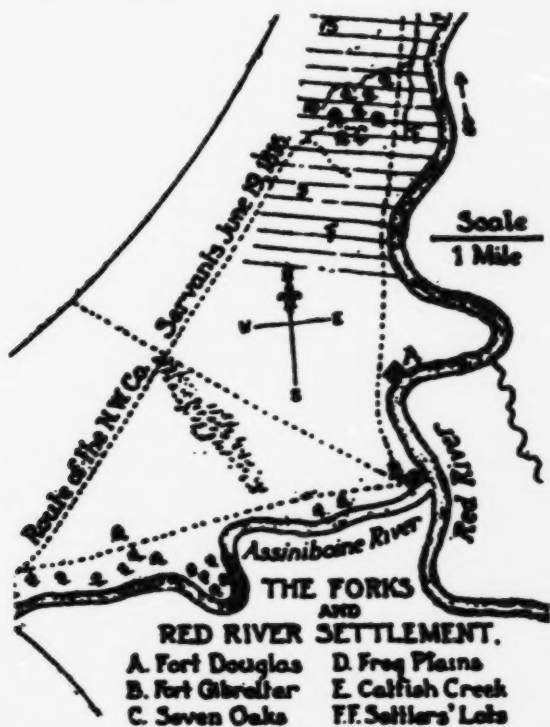
The colonists' first year proved difficult; their crops were poor and they were forced to rely on pemmican to survive. Afraid that another winter of starvation lay ahead, Miles Macdonell, the governor of the colony issued the "Pemmican Proclamation," a document that prohibited the export of "any provision, either flesh, fish, grain, or vegetable" from Assiniboia for one year. The NWCo viewed this embargo as a direct attack on their trade network.

Without appreciating the implications of his action, Macdonell issued a second proclamation that forbade the running of buffalo near the settlement. As traders and settlers hunted on foot, this was seen as a direct move to interfere with the Métis, who hunted on horseback and "ran" the buffalo. Most Métis were the descendants of early traders and Indian women, and many worked for the NWCo supplying provisions. Consequently, Macdonell's two proclamations served to solidify the

alliance between the Métis and the NWCo and to intensify their mutual hostility towards the colony and the HBC.

By 1814 the Métis were already identifying themselves as a distinctive group, or "New Nation." The actions of the HBC and its representatives in the colony were seen by men like Grant to be a violation of his people's rights and privileges. The NWCo was quick to promote these sentiments and to encourage hostility towards the colony. In a shrewd move, they appointed Cuthbert Grant a captain of the Métis and thus secured a firm ally for their cause. As one of the few educated people of mixed-blood in the North-West, Grant was able to command the respect of his compatriots. This, combined with his loyalty to the NWCo, allowed the Nor'Westers to use Grant to promote their interests in the fur trade war.

In the spring of 1815, Grant and a group of his followers began to harass the settlement. Their efforts were only temporarily successful as the settlers who were driven out returned in August to re-establish the colony. But once Grant was named "Captain General" of all the Métis, a new offensive was launched.



Map showing the route taken by Grant's men and the site of the "Battle of Seven Oaks"

The following spring Grant and his men seized the HBC pemmican from Fort Qu'Appelle and began their trek to Fort Bas de la Rivière at the mouth of the Red River. En route they captured and plundered Brandon House and then moved on towards the colony. Laden with three cartloads of pemmican, Grant chose to take the overland route around the settlement rather than travel on the river where his followers would be easy targets for the guns of the HBC post, Fort Douglas.

On 19 June 1816, Grant led his men in two groups across Frog Plain, about three kilometres north of the forks. The first band passed unnoticed, but the second group was spotted from the watchtower at Fort Douglas. The alarm was sounded and Governor Robert Semple and twenty-five men rode out to intercept the Métis near a bluff of trees known as "Seven Oaks."

The inexperienced settlers were no match for Grant and his men. The Métis marksmen approached on horseback, surrounded Semple's group and pushed them back towards the river. After a quick exchange of words, one of the colonists fired a warning shot, and the battle began. In a skirmish that lasted about fifteen minutes, Grant's troop suffered only one casualty, while Semple and twenty of his men were killed. Grant tried to spare the governor's life, but in the confusion Semple was killed by another member of the Métis group.



Courtesy Public Archives of Canada

"The fight at Seven Oaks, 1816", sketch by C.W. Jefferys

The victors pitched camp on Frog Plain and Fort Douglas was surrendered to them. Over the next three days Grant demonstrated that he was in full control of the situation. He assured the settlers that no one would be harmed and he kept his word. Prior to the evacuation of the colony on 22 June, Grant drew up receipts for all goods surrendered by the HBC. When the transactions were complete, the Métis and their NWCo allies once again controlled the area.

Grant's victory was short-lived. Lord Selkirk was already en route to the colony with a group of Swiss-German mercenaries recruited when the deMeuron regiment was disbanded after the 1812-1814 war. When he received word of the incident at Seven Oaks, he sent Macdonell ahead with a military force. Eventually, the settlers left their temporary camp at Jack River (now Norway House) and returned to the colony.

Commissioner W.B. Coltman was sent from Canada to investigate and report on the conditions of the North-West. Grant voluntarily surrendered to Coltman and returned to Montreal to stand trial on a variety of charges, including murder and larceny. For several years the dockets of the courts of Upper and Lower Canada were filled with criminal and civil actions related to the violence in the North West. The legal proceedings were often confusing, incomplete and marked by the ignorance and prejudice of the day. Grant was freed on bail and immediately returned to the interior. Although he never stood trial, he was cleared by implication when others who were charged with the murder of Semple were tried and acquitted.

Warden of the Plains and the Founder of Grantown

The skirmish at Seven Oaks represented the climax of the fur trade war. Years of fierce competition had pushed both companies near bankruptcy, and in 1821 they amalgamated under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company. The beginning of this new era was difficult for the Métis. In districts where there had once been two competing posts, the HBC maintained only one. Staff was reduced, and many Métis voyageurs and provisioners were released.

Cuthbert Grant was bitterly disappointed when he learned that he was one of the few NWCo clerks not to be kept on by the HBC. Nevertheless, his fortunes reversed after a meeting with George Simpson, the new governor of the company. Simpson was well aware of Grant's tremendous influence over the Métis and was impressed with his "mild" manners and "cool determination." In 1822 he offered the Métis leader a position at Fort Garry. Unfortunately, the incident at Seven Oaks was still fresh in the minds of the colonists at Red River, and he felt compelled to resign in 1824.

Grant did not remain unemployed for very long. By 1824 the HBC charter, which gave the company exclusive trading rights in a large area of what is now the Canadian west, was being seriously challenged by aggressive American traders. These competitors disregarded the com-

pany's monopoly and ventured into HBC territory to trade. In 1824 the company gave Cuthbert Grant a special licence to trade in the Turtle Mountain and Brandon areas in the hope that he might undermine the competition.

Although Grant appeared independent, he was actually an agent for the HBC. The goods he bartered were supplied by the company, and the furs he received were relayed to their posts. The venture was successful. He established "Fort Mr. Grant" just north of the American border near the present-day town of Hartney and was able to intercept trade en route to the Americans. His position was formally recognized in July 1828, when the HBC Council of the Northern Department of Rupertsland appointed him "Warden of the Plains." He was paid an annual salary of £ 200 and one of his main duties was to help prevent the illicit trade in furs.

The company had other worries besides competition from American free traders. In 1823 when Pembina was declared south of the new International Boundary, it passed outside HBC jurisdiction. Company officials began to worry that this predominantly Métis settlement might pose another threat to their trade monopoly. As a result, they tried to persuade the people at Pembina to relocate closer to Red River. To draw them back into HBC territory, the Company offered the settlers land on the White Horse Plain, and Governor George Simpson selected Cuthbert Grant to initiate the move from Pembina.

With Grant's encouragement, about fifty displaced families from Pembina and other areas of the North-West came to settle in what was eventually known as "Grantown." The total settlement, as described in



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Buffalo hunting, a sketch by Henri Julien

the 1824 land grant, began nineteen kilometres west of Fort Garry. It stretched sixteen kilometres west on the Assiniboine River to a ridge known as "Coteau des Festins" and extended ten kilometres inland from the river front. Each settler was given a lot approximately 240 metres wide that ran three kilometres back from the river.

Farming alone could not sustain the people of Grantown, and so they continued to hunt buffalo twice a year. As the herds became depleted, however, the Métis were forced to travel deep into Sioux territory to hunt. It became necessary to move in large groups for protection because the Sioux saw the Métis as trespassers and were liable to attack. People from Grantown, St. Boniface and Pembina would meet prior to the hunt to select a captain. Because of his reputation as a leader and hunter, Grant occupied this position for many years, and the organization and discipline of the hunt developed under his guidance.

Once the scouts spotted the herd, the Red River carts would be manoeuvred into circle formation, and the women would set up camp. Under Grant's orders, the men would fan out around the herd on horseback and the chase would begin. The Métis were excellent hunters and they prided themselves on their ability to shoot from the saddle and reload on the run. When the hunt was over, the women would bring in the carts and butcher the meat. The ritual continued until each vehicle was filled with 230 to 460 kilograms of meat. Once they returned to camp, the women would then dry the meat and pound it into pemmican.

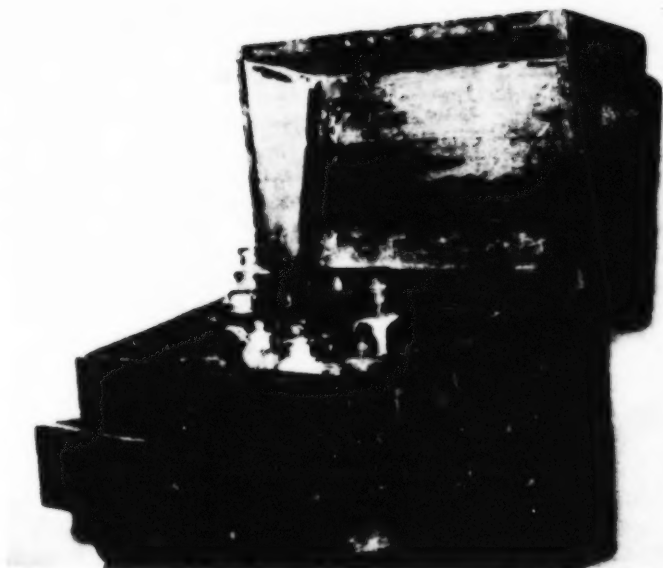
The character of Grantown was predominantly French and Roman Catholic. In 1823 when he married his third wife, Marie McGillis, Grant himself became a devout Roman Catholic. His large white home became the ecclesiastical centre of the settlement; it was used for religious services until 1834 and housed the priests until a presbytery was built. Aware of the value of education, Grant also allowed his home to be used as a schoolhouse for the children of the area.

A Man of Many Talents

In addition to his position as captain of the hunt and his work as a farmer and as Warden of the Plains, Grant acted as a private freighter between 1824 and 1825. He transported goods from York Factory to Red River on his own account and on consignment for the HBC.

Apparently, Grant had also received some medical training during his years in Scotland, and he became the first Métis to practice modern medicine. When epidemics swept the prairies, Grant travelled long distances to care for the sick, and he became known as a kind and compassionate physician. One of his medicine chests has been preserved and is on display at Manitoba's Museum of Man and Nature.

Always an enterprising individual, Grant began construction on the first water mill in the North-West in 1829. Located on the banks of Sturgeon Creek, a few kilometres west of the forks, the mill featured a huge wheel that was driven by the flow of the water. As the waterwheel turned, it caused a large stone inside the mill to revolve and grind grain into flour.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Cuthbert Grant's medicine chest

Although there were several windmills in Red River, Grant believed that his water-powered operation would prove to be more reliable. Unfortunately, his belief turned out to be ill-founded. In order to drive the wheel at a steady rate, Sturgeon Creek had to be dammed. The dam stretched seventy-three metres from bank to bank, and it repeatedly gave way. This, combined with the fact that the mill produced a poor quality grind, led Grant to abandon the venture after its third year of operation. Nevertheless, he went on to build a windmill at Grantown which served the village throughout his life.

Grant's role as a leader within the Métis community remained constant for a number of years. In 1834 when the Selkirk family sold the area of Assiniboia back to the HBC its governing body was expanded. Grant was appointed to the Council of Assiniboia to represent the opinions of the Métis, and he was present when the first meeting of the new council was convened in 1835. The colony was divided into four judicial districts, and Grant was named justice of peace for the White Horse Plain District, which included Grantown. In 1837 when the districts were reorganized and reduced to three, Grant became a magistrate for the Upper District. Several years later he served as one of the two sheriffs of Assiniboia and was also appointed to the Board of Works.

It is quite possible that Grant met a variety of interesting people through his work and travels, but few would have been as colourful as the self-styled "General" James Dickson. The general came to Red River

to recruit mercenaries who would help him to establish a free Indian state in California. The fame of the Métis hunters had spread across North America, and Dickson hoped to count them among his fighting men. Governor Simpson caught wind of the campaign and sent orders that Dickson's drafts were not to be honoured at HBC posts, leaving the general without funds for recruitment.

Dickson spent the winter at Red River where he was frequently seen with his friend, Cuthbert Grant. Invariably dressed in one of his many uniforms, he must have seemed an odd match for his Métis companion. Before he left in the spring of 1827, Dickson publicly bestowed his sword and epaulets on Grant claiming that "a better warrior" should have them. The sword is now in the possession of the Museum of Man and Nature.



Courtesy, Manitoba Archives

Cuthbert Grant's sword

The Later Years

One of the few opportunities for the inhabitants of Red River to earn a substantial living was through the illegal fur traffic with the Americans at Pembina who offered much higher prices than the HBC. During the 1840s free trading flourished and, in an attempt to stop the practice, British troops were sent to Red River in 1846. Two years later the troops were withdrawn, and another outburst of free trading followed.

In a bid to suppress the movement and reinstate the company monopoly, the HBC Chief Factor of the post at the Red River Settlement took legal action against four Métis free traders. The Sayer trial, named after one of the accused, was held in May 1849, and Grant sat as one of the presiding magistrates. Throughout the trial the courthouse was surrounded by a large group of angry Métis. Although a guilty verdict was returned by the jury, the court recommended mercy and Sayer was set free. Those outside the courtroom interpreted Sayer's release as a victory for free trade.

The outcome of the Sayer trial affected Grant's association with

the HBC. Company officials assumed that it demonstrated his diminishing influence over his Métis followers. In 1849 his annual tenure as Warden of the Plains had not been renewed, and the Company did not offer him another position. Moreover, other individuals such as Louis Riel, Sr. were beginning to emerge as leaders of the Métis in the late 1840s. Nevertheless, Grant's earlier role was acknowledged by the people of Grantown and by the Roman Catholic clergy. When he died on 17 July 1854, he was buried beneath the altar of their parish church.

After Grant died, the settlement that had once borne his name came to be known by its parish title, St. François-Xavier. Even though the name Grantown has disappeared, Cuthbert Grant remains an important figure in the history of Manitoba.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Cuthbert Grant of Grantown (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1963) by Margaret Arnett MacLeod and W.L. Morton is the most complete work on Grant's life. D. Bruce Sealey's *Cuthbert Grant and the Métis* (Agincourt: Book Society of Canada, 1976) provides a much simpler and more concise biography for young readers.

For an account of the Battle of Seven Oaks see the article by Joe Martin, "Bloodshed at Seven Oaks" in the *Beaver* (Summer 1966) and W.L. Morton's book, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967). Morton's book is also an excellent source on basic fur trade history. More detailed information can be found in, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1967) by F.E. Rich.

Credit

The cover photograph is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives. Special thanks to Professor D. Bruce Sealey for his help in the preparation of this pamphlet.



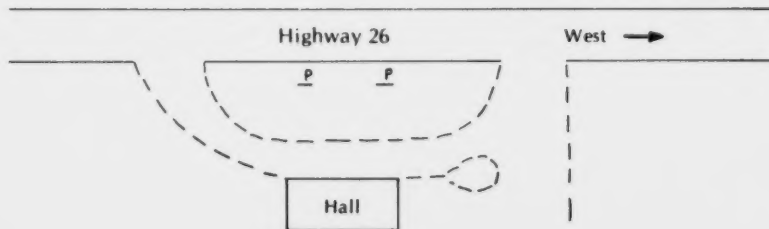
**CUTHBERT GRANT
(1793-1854)**

Near here lived Cuthbert Grant, founder of Grantown, now St. Francois-Xavier. His father, Cuthbert Grant senior, was a prominent North West Company trader. Cuthbert Grant the younger became an outstanding leader of the Métis and led the North West Company forces at the massacre at Seven Oaks in 1816. The Hudson's Bay Company named him Warden of the Plains in 1828. His task was to marshal the Métis in defense of the Red River Settlement. Later he became Councillor, Sheriff and Magistrate of the District of Assiniboia.

**THE HISTORIC SITES ADVISORY BOARD
OF MANITOBA**



Two plaques (English and French) are located in front of the community hall in St. Francois-Xavier.





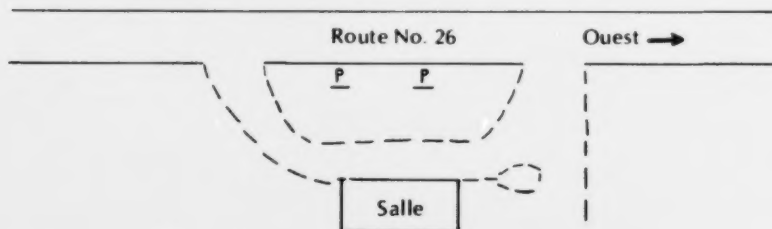
**CUTHBERT GRANT
(1793-1854)**

Près d'ici vécut Cuthbert Grant, le fondateur de Grantown, maintenant Saint-François-Xavier. Son père, Cuthbert Grant, était un "traiteur" renommé de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest. Cuthbert Grant fils devint un chef éminent des Métis; il était à la tête des forces de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest lors du massacre des Sept-Chênes en 1816. La Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson le nomma Gardien des Plaines en 1828. Sa tâche était de rassembler les Métis en cas d'attaque pour qu'ils se portent à la défense de la colonie de la Rivière-Rouge. Il devint plus tard Conseiller, Shériff et Magistrat du District d'Assiniboia.

**THE HISTORIC SITES ADVISORY BOARD
OF MANITOBA**



Deux plaques (en anglais et en français) situées devant la salle communautaire à Saint-François-Xavier.



OUR HERITAGE

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.

POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL